

# The Ethnography of Urban Benches

**T**hree rustic wooden benches are chained in a line alongside Connecticut Avenue between the sidewalk and a wooded finger of Rock Creek Park in Washington DC, one of the national park systems' largest natural urban units.<sup>1</sup>

The benches are too far apart for comfortable conversation, too short to sleep upon, their backs are to nature, and they face continuous traffic day and night. They are a quarter mile from the nearest fast food center, neither by a bus stop nor in an area obscure enough for lovers. But they are well used.

Who uses them? This question about an everyday sight prompted an ethnographic investigation including observation of bench use at different times and seasons, participation as a bench-sitter alone or with others, interviews of various National Park Service staff such as rangers, administrators, historians, and maintenance workers, and a literature search of topics such as urban planning, urban anthropology, and sociology.

I concluded, following a year and a half of observation, that the avenue benches function as a community front porch, a bridge between the public and the private. A territorial but also deeply symbolic space, the benches provide an area for diverse urban elements to face each other in peace. At the same time they allow for the fleeting moment of time-out in the middle of errands and on the journey from work. They are also, as are other kinds of city benches, a destination for those who include involvement with birds and squirrels, the most common or public of city animals, as vital to their functioning.

## History

Connecticut Avenue, considered Washington's most gracious boulevard, is also one of the most intensely used transportation routes through the city. The avenue is flanked by hotels and buildings containing shops, offices, and apartments. The land-use rhythm that helps define the avenue's character, alternating between apartment and commercial buildings, was decreed by zoning from the 1920s. Between the

commercial segments in the area called Cleveland Park are dowager apartment buildings and smaller walk-ups, mostly dating from the 1920s. Two large "modern" apartments built in the 1950s flank the finger of Rock Creek Park where the benches are chained.<sup>2</sup> Behind them, a trail traverses the woods. Rock Creek Park, itself, meandering through the city, consists of 1,754 acres of wooded ravines, sheer creek banks, hiking, biking and equestrian trails, and even an old mill and attendant waterfall.

The superintendent of one of the apartment buildings, who has worked in the area since 1950, recalls that the benches were installed in the early 1960s at the same time that the trail was built and at the request of residents of two buildings. For many years the benches simply perched in their spots, but about 15 years ago they were chained down because they were subject to vandals who turned them over and rolled them down the embankment. The park maintenance chief recalls that they were difficult to roll back up, particularly when wet.

## Use

The trail is used daily by dog walkers and on weekends and holidays by hikers in ones, twos, and families, some of whom park their cars or get off the bus and start from there and others of whom have hiked from further west and often pause to tie shoes and regroup on the benches.

Some folks walking from their apartments to the Metro (subway) nearby pass and sometimes rest on the benches, and others, often older, pause at the benches on their often more leisurely errands. Spanish-speaking families who have moved into the garden apartments that also dot the area frequent the seats too. The three benches, under their canopy of beech and oak and maple, welcome these disparate sets of residents. Local folk stop at the benches to commune with "nature" in the form of squirrels and pigeons and sparrows — mostly unaware of the extent of "nature" living just behind them.

For example, the Park Service has been tracking deer as they moved from the suburbanizing Montgomery County area of the Potomac River downstream toward downtown via the

park. They estimate there are about 25 resident deer in the Melvin Hazen area. Occasionally they are spotted in the woods behind apartment buildings.

Not far off the trail there is a fox den and there may be otter, too. And of course there are the raccoons which sometimes cross the avenue. All of the above are native species, protected in the park.

Closer to the conscious level of the neighborhood residents who use the benches are the homeless humans of whom there are varying numbers and perceptions. Very occasionally they sleep on the benches, including a young man who keeps his possessions in one of the nearby Metro lockers and, scion of a local gardening family, occasionally does yard jobs for residents of the area. Another local homeless person perches sometimes on a bench, like Peter Pan, but with a Walkman at her ear.

A police officer walking the trail found a cache of abandoned pocketbooks, presumably left by purse snatching juveniles from across the park who only kept the cash after ducking into the woods. The officer also noticed an area strewn with used syringes and some large wooden bats, probably a minor site of some of the runaway “punk rockers” who had for a while been slashing tires and bashing cars along the avenue.

Overnighting in Rock Creek Park is forbidden and, according to one official, “no one lives there.” But park workers find and dismantle “housing” made of plastic, discarded wooden boxes, and even “cabins” made of fallen trees. A major campsite was dismantled in October 1989. Use of the park as home is not a new phenomenon. A building superintendent recalls that one of the construction laborers on the 1950s buildings was a Korean War veteran who came home to find his wife gone and their apartment rented out to strangers. So he just moved into the woods behind his work. Subsequently he was hired as a gardener at the completed building, while continuing to live in the woods. And sometime later, through the interest of a resident who worked at the Capitol, he got a job there and an opportunity to buy a little house on “the hill.”

#### ***Feeding the Animals***

The homeless are not the cause of the occasional calls demanding that the Park Service remove the benches as a public nuisance. It is the pigeons, continuously fed by other neighbors, that call out the wrath of some residents. One

woman brings peanuts (a handful at a time casually pocketed on her trips to the supermarket) and places them in the crotch of the double beach tree behind a bench for Fritzie, her favorite black squirrel, an activity she began because she needed to force herself to get out in the fresh air at least once a day. She also likes to sit on the bench and watch nature and the people passing by, and occasionally talk to an acquaintance. One unusually warm winter morning a street person walking along with a disreputable looking bike, asked us for money and after we demurred, he wished us a very nice day. “Poor soul, he can’t understand why we feed the animals and not him,” the lady mused.

“Fritzie” is also fed many early mornings by a young lady who comes out in her bathrobe to exchange greetings with everyone’s pet squirrel and offer him morning sustenance. Every morning on the way to the Metro another regular drops left-over bread at the benches. Others anoint the area with birdseed to nourish at least 13 pigeons that roost on a limb above. The newspaper recently ran a picture of an 88-year-old woman, arms filled with some of the pigeons she has fed and played with for much of the 30 years she has lived in the vicinity.<sup>3</sup>

From time to time the benches serve as a place to make other offerings. On several occasions fruit has been laid out as if at a shrine, whole and wholesome-looking fruits. Occasionally clothing, a sweater or an old pair of pants, is left neatly folded on or stacked beneath the benches — safer from the rain—to be collected by one or another of the homeless mentioned above. Sometimes items are also accidentally left—usually children’s mittens and scarves.

#### ***Human Interactions***

Generally, passersby and those seated are inclined to make some harmless comment, an acknowledgment of mutual humanity. A distinguished looking elderly gentleman wiped down an empty bench with his newspaper and sat down, stating to me on the next bench, and to the world at large, “intermission.”

In the warmest weather, many people wait for the cooler evenings to sit on the benches and get a breath of fresh air. In the spring and fall they pour out during the days, feeling the sun and exulting in the wonderful Washington weather.

Winter and summer, in the current anti-smoking atmosphere, quite a few nearby residents

enjoy their cigarette or cigar at the benches. And sometimes roommates, family, or others, have to get away from each other, one imagines, when coming upon one of them reading late at night by the light of the street lamp.

The benches are not really designed for social interaction, because of the distance between them and their rigid formal line. Most often, strollers will stop and stand to chat with an acquaintance already seated. But sometimes pairs of passersby sit down together on one bench to continue their conversations. A wheelchair-bound neighbor usually sits at right angles to a bench where a friend is sitting, but occasionally faces the woods, with his back to the street. His use of the benches seems to be threefold: as much of nature as he can encompass easily; companionship; and always to feed the pigeons and squirrels.

A former sociology teacher at one of the universities was evicted from her apartment in one of the newer buildings by the trail. An eviction is a singular and shocking event in this neighborhood, where alternative arrangements are usually made privately and landlords never proclaim those who fall behind and cannot pay. So the newspapers reported the story with pictures of the woman, enthroned on one of the benches, clutching her electric typewriter in one hand, surrounded by boxes of her books, watched over herself by unknown neighbors, while the Park Police and District Social Services tried to make other arrangements with and for her. The kindness of strangers continued for almost three days. It was a moving story of an alcoholic fall and the rallying proclaimed as community.<sup>4</sup>

The following spring the rustic benches were replaced with new models of slatted, treated wood, armless on a metal frame, and bolted to the cement below rather than chained. Whereas the old benches had been purchased finished, and would be costly now, they also required skilled assembly and maintenance. But anyone can install the new ones, produced more economically at the park.

One user commented shortly after that he hates to sit on benches that don't have that multitude of carved initials to indicate loving, sitting use. But during the summer others said that "these new benches are so much more comfortable."

Well, there won't be any more initial carving. But the one or two neighbors who sit there

to whittle (much less messy there than in the apartments) or the ones who while away a bit of time playing the banjo, or taking time for a cigarette, don't appear bothered by the difference.

### Concluding Comments

Apartment dwellers want front porches. Or at a minimum, they want front steps to sit on or near the sidewalk. But architects and planners have responded more frequently with balconies or secret gardens away from the street, neither of which permit eye-level interaction in the course of which residents can come to recognize familiar faces, patterns of activity, and take account of the exceptions to both.

The history of the benches indicates that planning, or zoning, may set up initial situations and that the larger public works, like the Metro, have a major influence on their use. But mixed use in-town areas also develop their own priorities. It is not fortuitous that the benches were set on the rim of marvelous Rock Creek Park, rather it was taking neighborly advantage of the manner in which the park meets the city at this point when other improvements were being made.

Achieving such small goals is often aided and abetted not by organized groups, but by the very fact that people with particular wants can include in their neighborhood networks access to the goods or services they want from "City Hall" or the Park Service. Perhaps that is the sum of what we mean by community, a place to rally round in case of emergency and a shared space to provide something—even pigeons—upon which to bestow our concern for life.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Portions of this article previously appeared in *Park Bench on the Avenue. Places: A Quarterly Journal of Environmental Design*, vol. 8:4, 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> Articles in *The Washington Post*. Lewis, Roger K. "Connecticut Avenue is More Than a Street," 4/26/1986. Forgey, Benjamin, *Connecticut's New Jewel: The Saratoga, at Home on the Grand Avenue*. 11/11/1989.
- <sup>3</sup> Article in *The Washington Post*, Portrait, "Lunch Break," E3, 10/13/1989.
- <sup>4</sup> Article in *The Washington Post*, Fisher, Marc, "Neighbors Keep Vigil Over Evicted NW Woman," 11/8/1988.

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